

## Gerard Niebauer

### Veteran Volunteer

**Total Volunteer Hours: 2,374.75**

Sergeant, U.S. Air Force 1966 – 1970

Vietnam Service 9/1968 – 1/1969

Structural Repair (sheet metal, fiberglass)

### Medals | Honors

- Vietnam Service Medal

### Personal Background

Mr. Niebauer was born in Erie, PA and has been married for almost 55 years to his lovely wife.

Mr. Niebauer volunteers as a driver in the Volunteer Transportation Network (VTN) Program. He also volunteers in the VTN Office coordinating the transportation needs of other Veterans. He drives locally in Erie, to Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, and completes special runs as needed.

### Inspiration for Volunteering

Mr. Niebauer volunteers at the VA to help other Veterans get where they need to be for medical appointments.



## Timothy Ryan

### Veteran Volunteer

**Total Volunteer Hours: 5,592**

U.S. Navy, Corpsman  
1966 – 1970

#### Medals | Honors

- Vietnam Service Medal

#### Personal Background

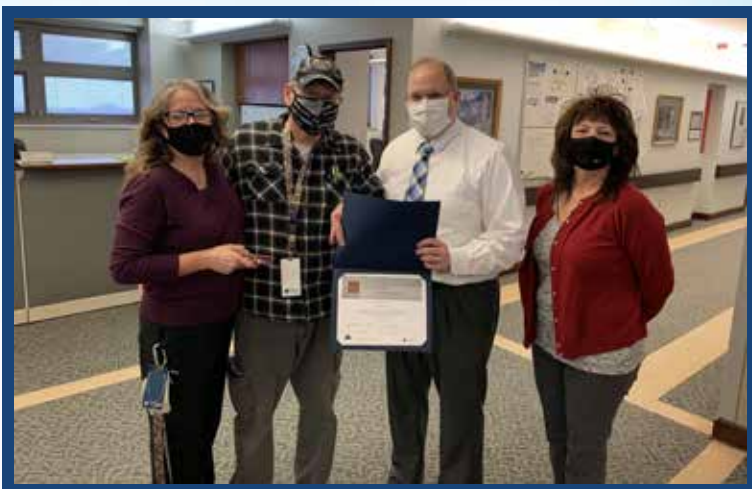
Mr. Ryan was born in Erie, PA. He has three children, 14 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren. He went to boot camp at Great Lakes, IL and was shipped off to his first vessel as a deckhand based in Norfolk, VA on the USS Neosho, AO-143 Tanker. He completed one Mediterranean cruise and five Caribbean cruises.

Mr. Ryan applied for Corpsman school and signed a 6-month extension to be accepted. He went to Corps school at Great Lakes and was then stationed at U.S. Naval Hospital Philadelphia working mostly in the sick officers' quarters and taking care of Marine Corps amputees. He finished his tour as a base ambulance driver.

After his tour in the Navy, Mr. Ryan returned home and began a career with Parker White Metal/PHB in Fairview, PA as a jitney driver, die cast production operator, and machine operator working with molten metals. He retired from PHB after 38 years and now enjoys cooking, exercising at the gym, and spending time with his family.

#### Inspiration for Volunteering

Mr. Ryan decided to become an Erie VA volunteer after using the Volunteer Transportation DAV as a patient himself. He spoke with a USMC Veteran driver, Paul Phillips, who explained the need for more drivers at the time. Mr. Ryan considers it an honor to drive and serve the Veterans.



## Layla A. Sulaiman

**Civilian Volunteer**

**Total Volunteer Hours: 207**

### Personal Background

Mrs. Sulaiman is originally from Iraq, married, and has 3 beautiful daughters. She practiced medicine, as a physician, in her native country before resettling in 2008 as a refugee in Erie, PA through the United Nations. It was a tremendous challenge for Mrs. Sulaiman and her family to come to the United States and required enormous sacrifices to successfully transition.

While adapting to the new culture and providing for her family, Mrs. Sulaiman continued to pursue her passion for medicine by studying at home for United States Medical Licensing Exams (USMLE). During that period, she volunteered in different places, such as Churches, homeless shelters, schools, offices and recently within the VAMC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here at the medical center, she helped in different departments, including escorting, the vaccination clinic, and recently in the Urgent Care Center.

### Inspiration for Volunteering

Healing people and taking their burden from them during illness is what has driven Mrs. Sulaiman to medicine and volunteering at the Erie VAMC; it is also that passion that has helped her pass all the steps of USMLE.



## Rich Thomas

### Veteran Volunteer

**Total Volunteer Hours: 6,0540.50**

Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Hospital Corpsman U.S. Navy  
Senior Master Sergeant, Chief Enlisted Manager, U.S.  
Air Force

### Personal Background

Mr. Thomas is honored to have served 25 years in uniform. His career serving in both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force, in two very different and unrelated jobs, provided him with unique experiences.

After enlisting with an Erie recruiter in October of 1968, Mr. Thomas completed boot camp and was later trained to be a Structural Aircraft Mechanic (AMS). He was sent to a training squadron in Beeville, TX, following which he received orders to a Patrol Squadron (VP-40) out of Moffett Field, CA. While aboard, Mr. Thomas chased the Soviet Navy, particularly the Soviet submarine fleet around the south Pacific and off the coast of Vietnam. He called Japan, the Philippines, Guam, Taiwan, and Thailand "home" for the next two years.

Mr. Thomas has always held interest in health and fitness. He was offered an opportunity to be retrained as a U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman. According to Mr. Thomas "a good Corpsman in your unit is worth its weight in gold. For the marines we serve with, it's a matter of life and death." He was proud to don the medical symbol on his sleeve and call himself a Corpsman. Mr. Thomas worked in Med/Surg., ER, Sick Bay, and was the NCOIC of the delivery room. Additionally, due to his prior aircraft experience, Mr. Thomas was chosen as Senior Corpsman for the base helicopter Search and Rescue Unit (SAR).

Once returning to civilian life, Mr. Thomas became a nurse. He eventually felt burned out in this career and returned as an aircraft mechanic with the California Air National Guard. He was offered an opportunity to go on active duty at a Continental Air Defense Alert Detachment assigned to 1st Air Force and NORAD. Mr. Thomas quickly rose through the ranks and ended his career as the Chief Enlisted Manager of a Detachment at Langley AFB in Virginia.



### Inspiration for Volunteering

After his military retirement, Mr. Thomas felt his medical training should be put to good use. The VA offered an opportunity to use his knowledge and training as a volunteer. For the last ten years, Mr. Thomas has worked in the Urgent Care Center, applying his skills and helping Veterans.

"It has been one of the best experiences of my life. Having the chance to help my fellow Veterans in their time of need is a very special blessing. There are many people at the VA who deserve my extreme thanks, they are very special people," Mr. Thomas states. "Unfortunately, all my records and pictures related to my service were destroyed in a forest fire in 2011. This was a huge loss and broke my heart."





## Lawrence (Larry) Nies

### Veteran Volunteer

**Total Volunteer Hours: 365**

Specialist 4, MP, U.S. Army 1970 – 1972

#### Personal Background

Mr. Nies grew up in Greene Township, attended St. Boniface, then graduated from Wattsburg High School in 1969. Following his draft in 1970, Mr. Nies spent 8 weeks at Fort Dix. He then traveled to Fort Knox for AIT, where he learned to drive armored personnel carriers and tanks, as well as fire various firearms, from the 45 caliber side arm to rocket launchers.

During Christmas leave, he married his high school sweetheart, Kathleen. Mr. Nies then returned to Kentucky to finish AIT.

After finishing AIT, Mr. Nies received his first assignment and traveled to Germany (land of his ancestors). Upon arriving at Sheridan Casern in Augsburg, Germany, he learned they already had enough tank and personnel carrier drivers. This meant he'd be carrying my M16 wherever he went. He did not like physical exercise, so when asked to join the Military Police, he jumped at the chance. "Being an MP was definitely a learning experience," Mr. Nies states, "starching your uniform enough so your arms and legs would hardly go through, shining your shoes/boots with spit, getting car-bumped by a German local while you're trying to direct traffic; the list goes on."

By summer, he brought Kathleen over to live with him. They rented a local apartment and purchased a red 1957 Volkswagen, which took them around Germany. Together they experienced Oktoberfest, watched the preparations for the Olympics in Munich, and viewed some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. They also traveled to France, Italy, Austria, and rode a boat across the channel to England. Mr Nies admits that, "Germany ruined my taste for American beer!"

Returning to civilian life in 1972, Mr. Nies held various jobs including laborer in the Painters Union, building maintenance in County government, jitney and overhead crane operator at GE, maintenance tech at Johnson Controls, and copy machine repair technician. After repeated layoffs, he decided to work for himself as a carpenter and also opened a window and door replacement company. In 1999, he and his wife invested in a franchise with National Property Inspections and Mr. Niews became an ASHI-certified inspector for residential and commercial buildings, as well as a PA-certified radon tester.



Mr. Nies and his wife built their home in Greene Township – nail by nail, board by board – a job that continues to this day! They cleared the land and gathered and split enough rocks for two fireplaces. They did all this while helping family members with farming and babysitting, as well as raising two wonderful kids of their own. Both of which are now married, providing them with five grandchildren, a granddaughter-in-law, and two great grandchildren.

In his spare time, Mr. Nies joined the National Ski Patrol at Peek n' Peak in 1980 and continues to ski with them after 40 years. He also enjoys gardening, walking, watching movies, listening to audio books, and cutting wood in the summer for heat in the winter.

#### Inspiration for Volunteering (as written by Larry)

When my son, as a teenager, asked me why I volunteer, my answer then was the same as it is now: "If not me, then who?"